

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) addresses a proposal by AT&T to remove portions of a telecommunications system, known as the P140 system, that is non-supportive to its fiber optic network. As jurisdictional agencies of federal lands crossed by the project, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are responsible for determining the terms and conditions of any removal activities. The agencies are also responsible for determining rehabilitation actions to promote restoration of the land. The NPS is the lead agency responsible for preparing the DEIS, the BLM is a cooperating agency, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is a coordinating agency.

This project addresses 220 miles of the P140 system, including 7.7 miles in New Mexico, 7.4 miles in Nevada, and 205.2 miles in California. The P140 system consists of buried cable, repeater huts, manholes, marker posts, associated electronic equipment, and an access corridor.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The NPS and BLM have determined that federal action is necessary to ensure the project meets the following objectives: 1) eliminates an unnecessary utility right of way, 2) minimizes the residual impacts of the right of way and any associated improvements on Preserve and public land resources, 3) promotes the restoration of the Mojave National Preserve lands consistent with the long-term goals of preservation (for NPS lands), 4) promotes the restoration of public lands consistent with the long-term goals of conservation (for BLM lands), and 5) responds to AT&T's proposal to remove cable and equipment and relinquish easements.

The federal action for the project will be the issuance of permits by the NPS and BLM, which would incorporate conditions for any removal and rehabilitation actions as a prerequisite for terminating easements on federal lands.

AT&T budgeted and scheduled this removal project for 1997-1998 and funds may not be available after 1998. Funding levels for removal projects are determined in large part by federal tax depreciation considerations and geographic location. Therefore, AT&T has determined that its costs for this project must meet their cost containment goals that include planning, environmental review, permitting, construction, and monitoring.

THE PROPOSED ACTION - ALTERNATIVE A

The Proposed Action includes removal of 174.5 miles of cable, removal of repeater huts and manholes along 220 miles, removal of marker posts along 174.2 miles, and elimination of 39.8 miles of the access corridor and 4 miles of dual track. In addition, the Proposed Action includes rehabilitation actions to promote revegetation and habitat recovery at the repeater hut sites and along portions of the access corridor. No rehabilitation actions are proposed along the right of way where cable would remain in the ground. Measures to reduce or avoid impacts associated with cable removal are considered mitigation for the right of way.

Because the original grants for the rights of way on federal lands do not include specific rehabilitation measures to be completed upon termination, a range of rehabilitation actions for the repeater hut sites and portions of the access corridor is identified in the DEIS.

ISSUES

Issues and concerns were raised by the public during scoping and by jurisdictional agencies during the preparation of the DEIS. The most significant environmental issues raised were the affect of cable removal activities on desert vegetation, wilderness, and the desert tortoise, a federally threatened species. Specific concerns include: 1) removal of buried cable would damage existing vegetation which could take 20 - 50 years to recover to present conditions, 2) construction-related activities would result in adverse affects to the desert tortoise, including mortality, harassment, and loss of habitat, and 3) cable removal and rehabilitation activities would require the use of mechanized equipment and travel in wilderness areas. An additional concern has been raised that recreational access to open desert areas on federal lands could be restricted by eliminating portions of the access corridor.

In addition to concerns raised about the affects of cable removal activities, concerns have also been raised about leaving the cable in the ground. These include concerns about the government needing to conduct future maintenance or cable removal activities; the possibility of unauthorized mining of buried cable if copper becomes more valuable; and the possibility of a future release of cable-related constituents, such as lead, to the environment if soil conditions change.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives were developed to avoid or reduce adverse affects on desert vegetation, wilderness, the desert tortoise, and recreational access. Because the original right of way grants for public and state lands in New Mexico and private and state lands in California give AT&T the right to remove cable and equipment, it was necessary to assume cable and equipment removal in these areas. Therefore, all of the action alternatives include removal of varying amounts of cable and equipment consistent with the original terms of the right of way grants. The No Action Alternative is included as a baseline condition to compare with the action alternatives.

Alternative B was developed to protect desert tortoise critical habitat on federal lands by not removing cable from these areas, and by eliminating more of the access corridor within critical habitat. Specifically, cable would be removed along 113.7 miles outside of critical habitat on federal lands; repeater huts and manholes would be removed along 220 miles; marker posts would be removed along 174.7 miles; and 51.6 miles of the access corridor and 4 miles of dual track would be eliminated and rehabilitated.

Alternative C was developed to minimize construction-related impacts on desert vegetation and desert tortoise on federal lands by not removing any cable on federal lands, and by eliminating the access corridor in wilderness areas only. Specifically, cable would be removed along 72.3 miles primarily on state and private lands; repeater huts and manholes would be removed along 220 miles, marker posts would be removed along 174.7 miles; and 5.4 miles of the access corridor and 4 miles of dual track would be eliminated and rehabilitated.

SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

Proposed Action — Alternative A

In general, the Proposed Action would involve trade-offs between long-term, adverse affects on desert resources as a result of cable removal activities and the permanent gains or benefits

associated with removal of structures and rehabilitation actions at the repeater hut sites and along the access corridor.

Removal and rehabilitation activities would result in unavoidable, long-term adverse effects on desert vegetation, animal species of concern, wilderness areas, soil productivity, and visual aesthetics. Construction activities would also result in temporary adverse air quality and noise impacts. Removal of marker posts along 220 miles would enhance desert tortoise habitat by eliminating predator perches, and removal of repeater huts would enhance desert aesthetics. Rehabilitation actions along the access corridor would have an unavoidable, permanent adverse effect on recreational access to open desert areas on federal land. Rehabilitation actions along the access corridor and at the repeater hut sites, overall, would have a permanent beneficial impact on desert resources.

Alternative B

This alternative would result in long-term losses of desert vegetation and desert tortoise habitat due to 113.7 fewer miles of cable removal activities, but would affect 61 fewer miles than the Proposed Action.

The enhancement of desert tortoise habitat by eliminating predator perches along 220 miles would be the same as the Proposed Action. Elimination of 12 more miles of the access corridor would result in a greater permanent gain to desert tortoise habitat by eliminating vehicle-related impacts, but would have greater impacts on recreational access than the Proposed Action. The permanent enhancement of habitat values at the repeater hut sites would be the same as the Proposed Action. The permanent visual enhancement associated with the removal of the aboveground structures would be the same as the Proposed Action.

Alternative C

This alternative would result in long-term loss of desert vegetation and desert tortoise habitat due to 72.3 fewer miles of cable removal activities, but would affect 102 miles less than the Proposed Action.

The enhancement of desert tortoise habitat by eliminating predator perches along 220 miles would be the same as the Proposed Action. Eliminating 34 fewer miles of the access corridor as compared to the Proposed Action would result in a smaller permanent gain to desert tortoise habitat but would avoid the recreational access impacts of the Proposed Action. The permanent enhancement of habitat values at the repeater hut sites would be the same as the Proposed Action. The permanent visual enhancement associated with removal of the aboveground structures would be the same as the Proposed Action.